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ABSTRACT

The decontextualized nature of literacy has been a recurrent issue in discussions of the consequences of literacy over the last twenty years. The central thesis of these discussions is that the nature of written discourse itself leads directly or indirectly to changes in cognitive processing, linguistic progressing, cultural development, and/or the evolution of society. A more recent view holds that the consequences of literacy derive from the nature of literacy practices during literacy acquisition. The difference between the two views lies in what is assumed to be inherent in written discourse. The paper reviews both sides of the issue and argues that literacy brings about social and cultural changes which in themselves are of a decontextualized nature. It is suggested that literacy be viewed as a social tool involved in "gatekeeping," the establishment of social relationships, and enculturation. It is further suggested that in American society, schooling has a major role in how literacy is used as a social tool, including the teaching or learning of an alienated linguistic framework. (AOS)

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SCHOOL CULTURE AND THE FUTURE OF LITERACY

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UD 022 839

Paper presented at the Future of Literacy Conference, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, April 2, 1982.

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The decontextualized nature of literacy has been a recurrent issue in discussions of the consequences of literacy over the last twenty years. The central thesis of these discussions is that the nature of written discourse, itself, leads directly or indirectly to changes in cognitive processing, linguistic progressing, cultural development, and/or the evolution of society.

Recently, a second view of the consequences of literacy has emerged. The central thesis of this second direction is that the consequences of literacy derive from the nature of literacy practices, including the nature of literacy practices during literacy acquisition.

The difference between the two views lies in what is assumed to be inherent in written discourse. The first direction--which for convenience I've labelled the text-out view--views literacy as having inherent qualities, (such as being linear, progressive, cummulative) that lead to particular sets of consequences. The second direction--which for convenience I've labelled the text-in view--views the nature of literacy and its resultant consequences as the result of how people use written discourse.

The major thesis of this paper is consistent with and lends support to the text-in view. Literacy is viewed as a tool through which people manipulate each other, establish social relationships, define who each other is, establish social position, etc. This

> inevitably place an emphasis on the 'un-natural' 'unoral' decontextualized process of repetition, copying, verbatim memory.

Thus, literacy brings about social and cultural changes which in themselves are of a decontextualized nature.

Several theorists have viewed these changes that are the result of literacy development as co-occurring and interrelated with changes in cognitive processes. For example, Ong (1977) states:

> Writing has made possible the vast evolution of consciousness that marks the later stages of human history. Without writing, not only tightly plotted lengthy narrative but also the kind of mental processes which go with the composition of even an encyclopedia article, not to mention more massive scholarly and scientific treatises, would be unthinkable in the fullest sense of this term. Oral cultures cannot organize information in this sequentiality. Writing has made possible not only development of science and technology as well as of the humanities (that is, the study of language, history, philosophy, theology, and other subjects having to do with man not as a physical being or an organism, but with man as a self-conscious being and thus

theoretical construct is described through the analysis of several representative school-like literacy events.

Before discussing these school-like literacy events, both the text-out and text-in perspectives are briefly reviewed.

Text-Out Views of the Consequences of Literacy

The central issue in text-out views of literacy is the decontextualized nature of printed discourse. Decontextualization refers the use of language outside of the context for which it was originally intended. Writing exists long after the situation has dissolved for which it was created and for which it was intended. A reader can apply the writing to new, unintended situations, can mediate his/her interpretation of the writing by reference to other events and other writings. The 'permanence' of writing allows literacy to be both cummulative and applicable outside of the original context.

Goody (1977; Goody & Watt, 1968) extends the concept of decontextualization in terms of the implications of writing, as a communicative resource, for societal structure. The cummulative nature of writing and its application outside of its original context requires schooling. As Goody (1977, cited in Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz, 1981) states:

> The whole process of removing children from the family, placing them under distinct authority, can be described as one of decontextualization [original emphasis], formalization, for schools

with the life of the mind and with freedom); it has also made possible the complex relationships between large groups of people which a fully populated planet demands. (p. 256)

Text-out views, as represented by Goody and Ong, suggest an implicit hierarchy between oral and literate culture. Literate culture representing an advanced development. Tannen (1980) presents an alternative text-out view. Both literacy and oralcy are viewed as modes of cummunication that represent different sets of communicative goals and speaker/author-audience relationships. As Tannen states:

> The key distinction is not between orality vs. literacy as such but between strategies that have been associated with oral and literate tradition which can be employed in any mode [reading or writing]. What has been called "oral tradition" is language use which emphasizes shared knowledge or the relationship between communicator and audiences: What has been called "literate" emphasizes decontextualized content or downplays communicator/audience interaction. As communication can contain more or fewer of the strategies associated with these traditions to greater or lesser degrees, I [Tannen] further suggest that the distinction be conceived of not as a dichotomy but rather as a continuum. (p. 2)

For Tannen, the decontextualized nature of literacy is a means for framing the communicative relationships between people and for framing an orientation to the interpretation of either spoken or written text.

The issue of decontextualization is also an issue in some of the recent discussions of schooling and literacy learning. Olson (1977) suggests that literacy learning and schooling are decontextualized in nature and that...

> ...written, logical statements are not merely representations of knowledge but a particular form of activity that specifies reality in its own biased form. ...literacy in general and schooling in particular are instrumental in the construction of a <u>particular</u> form of knowledge that is relevant to a particular set of socially valued activities. (p. 67; original emphases)

Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz (1981) suggests a similar construct. For them, the transition to literacy--which they note, is typically a school function--requires that children learn not only a linguistic system for discourse processing but also a "meta-level at which individuals make sense of what they perceive by integrating it into previous experience" (p. 98). As they lucidly state,

> The move to literacy requires children to make some basic adjustments to the way they <u>socially</u> attribute meaning to the events and

> processes of the everyday world in order to loosen their dependence upon contextually specific information and to adopt a decontextualized perspective. (p. 99)

Unlike the historical perspectives of literacy development (Ong, 1977; Goody & Watt, 1968; Disch, 1973; Havelock, 1963), Tannen, Olson, Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz, place no inherent hierarchical value on literacy as a decontextualized process. Rather, each merely describes the situation as they see it.

Text-In Views of the Consequences of Literacy

The text-in perspective views literacy as a social tool used to structure relationships between individuals and groups. This perspective downplays the information-communicative function of reading and writing and emphasizes its social/cultural function. As Key (1980) states, scholars and researchers have been looking at language -- including reading and writing -- with an inappropriate focus on the informative function of language.

> Perhaps the difficulty that scholars have in understanding <u>meaning</u> can be traced to the wrong focus in looking at the use of language. The proportion of people who read and write books compared with the number of people who do not use language in this informative way is vastly unbalanced. This fact has distorted our understanding of what language is and has

> led us in academia to believe that language is first of all a vehicle to convey ideas - a propositional artifact. It is possible that much of language has little 'meaning' as such, but is rather a 'programmed' way of getting from here to there in time. (p. 13)

Key seems to suggest that language in general, including reading and writing, be viewed as social processes, as ritualistic behavior, used by individuals to obtain social goals and not necessarily cognitive-oriented goals.

There are two dimensions to this perspective in viewing the relationship of literacy to society and culture. Within one dimension, proficiency in decontextualized literacy events is viewed as a gatekeeping device in order to differentiate access to social, psychological and physical rewards. Within the second dimension, literacy learning is viewed as a process of cultural communication having both social and cultural consequences. These two dimensions are interrelated.

A key construct involved in both dimensions is the role of schooling in literacy development. Schooling needs to be viewed as both separate from and integrated with literacy development. That is, the cognitive, social, and cultural consequences of literacy depend upon the nature of the literacy practices in which one engages (Scribner & Cole, 1981).

These two dimensions of the text-in perspective are discussed below.

Literacy as Ritual

Literacy--reading and writing--are primarily viewed as cognitive and linguistic processes. A person interacts with print and derives a meaning from the print. Such definitions of reading and writing obscure the fact that identifying the occurrence of reading and writing is a social event. That is, teachers, parents, or researchers judge the occurrence of reading on the basis of social interactive criteria (Heap, 1980).

For example, consider the following situation captured as part of ethnographic study of reading in a junior high school classroom. The teacher is engaging students in a question-answer discussion on the social studies passage students were to have read during study time. Many students raise their hands and answer questions. One of the students was observed attempting to raise his hand at inappropriate moments (e.g. before the teacher had asked the question). This student was also observed to be carefully monitoring his classmates' behavior. Eventually the student raised his hand appropriately. He raised his hand several more times before he was called on by the teacher. However, rather than asking for an answer the teacher praised the reluctant student for participating and rewarded him with a star. The teacher mentioned how proud she was that the student had read the passage and promptly ended the discussion. The student never had to answer the question. The example shows how social criteria--raising one's hand and participating in the discussion--are used to infer the occurrence of reading.

The nature of the social criteria used from situation to situation may differ. Nonetheless, people learn what criteria will be employed in what types of events and orient their behavior around that criteria. A sociolinguistic study by DeStefano, Pepinsky, & Sanders (1981) highlights this process. They studied several students in a first grade classroom. They found that although the students made little gain in reading proficiency as measured by comprehension tests, each of the students learned the interactional language of classroom reading events. Having learned the interactional language -- knowing what to do, when, and how -- allowed the students to successfully participate in the lessons without increasing reading comprehension proficiency.

Bloome (1982) describes literacy events in terms of participation structures. Participation structures are the sets of expectations, norms, and rules for appropriate participation within events. Bloome (1982) describes these events as occurring on a continuum from isolated reading to social reading. Isolated reading involves the interaction of a person and a text only (see Diagram 1 and Figure 1). Social reading involves the interaction of several people and a text simultaneously (see Diagram 2 and Figure 2). In an ethnographic study of a junior high school, Bloome (1981; 1982) found that students signalled the participation structure of literacy events to each other, and used the participation structure of reading events to structure relationships between themselves and others. For example, in order to avoid interaction with a threatening teacher, students were often observed to signal their involvement in an isolated reading participation structure. Such signalling communicated the

inappropriateness of an outsider (the teacher or another student) disturbing or interfering the student. Teachers were often observed within the study to structure, enforce and reward an isolated reading participation structure in their classrooms. On the other hand, students in most situations tended to favor a social reading participation structure.

What Bloome's, DeStefano's et. al.'s, and Heap's research suggests is that people involved in face-to-face interaction literacy events hold each other accountable for the ways in which they behave. Participants need to adhere to social rules for appropriate participation or be stigmatized, reprimanded, or suffered other potentially negative consequences.

Literacy Events as Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping refers to the process of selecting individuals for receiving benefits. The benefits can be physical (e.g. food), psychological (e.g. positive self-concept, praise), and/or social (e.g. status, power). When literacy is used as a gatekeeping process, individuals must perform literacy acts in specified ways in order to 'pass through the fate.'

One example of literacy as a gatekeeping process is the use of literacy tests as a prerequisite for voting. Another example, is described by Dore (1976) in his discussion of the diploma disease. The diploma disease occurs when the prerequisites for acquiring a job involve irrelevant credentialing based on school and academic progress. For example, needing a Ph.D. to drive a bus. One way to

view the gatekeeping process as based on proficiency in school academic activities (such activities primarily involve reading and writing).

However, the use of literacy as a gatekeeping process is neither simple nor straightforward. As Graff (1982; 1972) points out, one can and could gain status and power without having to be literate. What is necessary, is access to literacy and ability to use it appropriately. Thus, a merchant could gain status and power without being literate him or herself if that merchant could hire someone to take care of the literacy demands made of the merchant. In such cases, the literacy that one "buys" or "owns" (e.g. having a literate relative to take care of literacy demands) becomes associated with the buyer or owner.

Within the school context, literacy events provide a major means of differentiating instruction and gatekeeping. As McDermott (1977), Rist (1978) and others have pointed out, students are tracked into reading groups on the basis of social variables and linguistic variables that have only tangential relationships with reading comprehension. In effect, a hierarchical structure is established based on student adherence to the social criteria established for school based literacy events. The result is that different 'gates' are opened for different students which have the potential for leading to different sets of consequences.

School Culture and Literacy as a Socio-cultural Tool

The previous sections have described theoretical constructs which suggest that literacy be viewed as a social tool. As a gatekeeping

device, literacy functions to establish differential reward systems. As a social process or ritual, literacy becomes a set of social behaviors for which participants are held accountable. In this section, these uses of literacy are viewed within the framework of literacy as one tool of social and cultural communication or cultural transmission. That is, through literacy processes and events, social processes and enculturation processes occur.

On the surface level, these social and enculturation processes look like a move towards a decontextualized linguistic framework. And indeed, in many cases, this may be so. Scollon & Scollon (1982), Michaels (1981), among others, have described school reading events in which students have been reprimanded or corrected for not adhering to a decontextualized framework. However, the key issue in these events is not whether a decontextualized framework has been applied, but rather whether a student has been able to adopt the linguistic, social, cultural, and cognitive framework of the dominant culture. Indeed, the framework that one needs to adopt in many American classrooms can best be characterized as alienated--removed from any sense of self or of one's world. The following example of a literacy event clarifies these theoretical constructs.

This example is typical of many of the literacy events that get played out in American classrooms at every grade. The example comes from a remedial reading class at an urban junior high school. The reading program is based on the Random House High Intensity Learning System program, which is a competency/mastery based program. One of the students, Michael, failed his pre-test on the skill of "Under-

standing Character." He was assigned Exercise 98, Task A to E in a workbook to help him learn this skill (see Diagram 3). Michael got every answer wrong. Yet, his responses indicate that he understood the text. Indeed, he could explain his answers in terms of the text itself (see Table 1 for a transcript of Michael's explanation of his answers).

Perhaps more interesting than Michael's answers and explanation is the fact that most college educated people could get every answer correct and, with the exception of the first question, not only understand the rationale for Michael's answers but agree that Michael's answers are better answers.

What seems to have occurred is that Michael completely understands the passage and is answering honestly. But, to get the correct answers one must adopt a linguistic framework that is specific to these types of tasks or school tests. There's a 'game' being played and Michael doesn't know its rules.

This 'game' or linguistic framework is neither decontextualized nor contextualized. That dimension simply does not apply in any emic sense. What counts is knowing the specific linguistic framework--which is associated with only these types of tasks. It requires denial of real world knowledge, both personal and general. In effect, it requires the reader to become alienated from not only his or her means of making sense of the world but also from any sense-making whatsoever.

Michael's failure results in having to do more of similar types of activities, and in a public display of his failure through the H.I.L.S. record-keeping system. Like many of the students in Michael's

class and similar classes, Michael will continue to fail unless he learns the alienated linguistic framework and/or there is an intervention.

Implications

The example above is but one recurrent type of literacy event that 'gatekeeps' not on the basis of a decontextualized framework but rather on the basis of an alienated linguistic framework (which is not to suggest, one way or the other, that gatekeeping on the basis of a decontextualized framework is being advocated). Such gatekeeping and enculturation has two sets of implications. One set for those who successfully learn the linguistic framework and one set for those who fail to learn it.

Failure to learn the alienated linguistic framework and make it through the 'gates' can result in stigmatization and a denial of many of the benefits that society has to offer its members. On the other hand, success is learning the alienated framework and making it through the 'gates' would result in a greater potential for receiving the benefits that society has to offer. However, both success and failure would seem to have consequences for the kinds of influences exerted on one's socio-cultural framework and cognitive framework. This is merely to say that the nature of the literacy practices in which one engages influences the nature of learned cognitive and linguistic processes.

In summary, I have suggested that literacy be viewed as a social tool involved in gatekeeping, the establishment of social

relationships, and enculturation. Further, I have suggested that in American society, schooling has a major role in how literacy is used as a social tool, including the teaching or learning of an alienated linguistic framework.

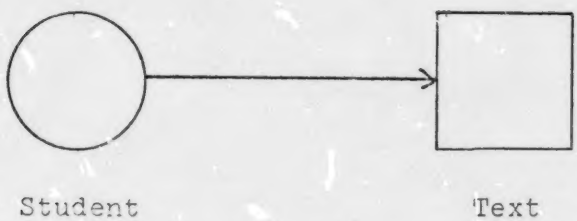

Diagram 1: Isolated Reading

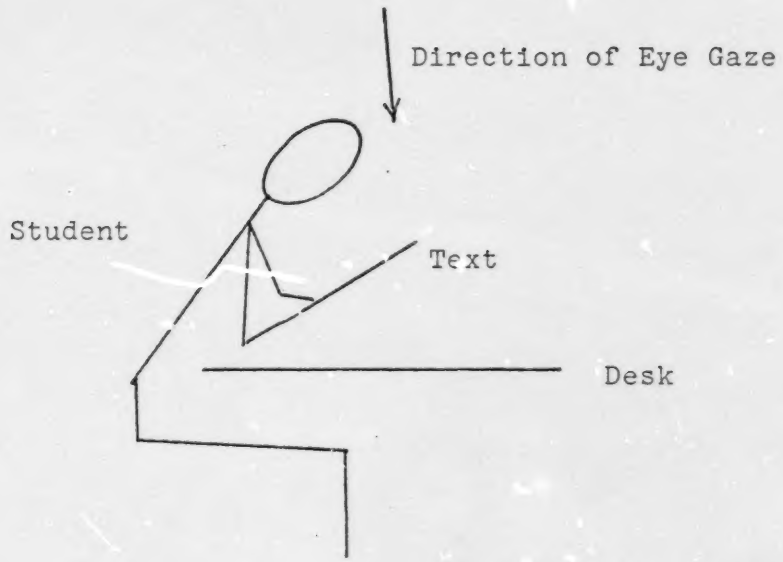

Figure 1: Ideal Postural Configuration of Isolated Reading

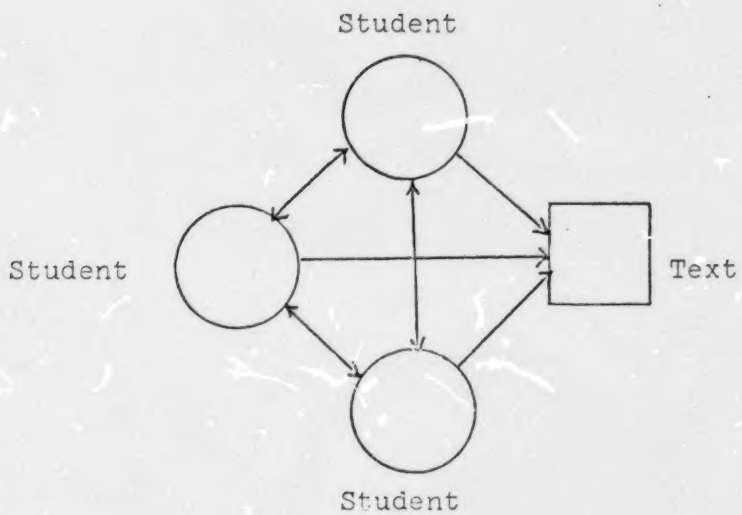

Diagram 2: Social Reading

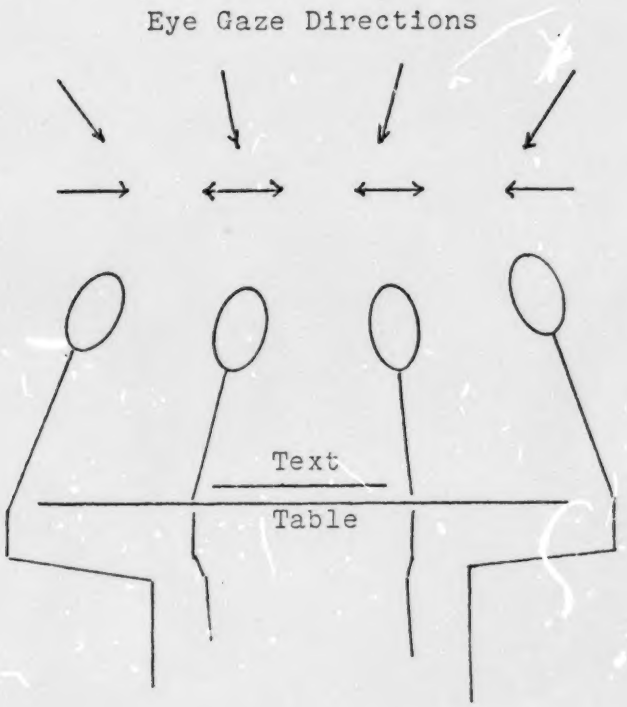

Figure 2: Ideal Postural Configuration Social Reading

98 Task A

UNDERSTANDING CHARACTER Side 1

from Reading House Series: Comprehension and Vocabulary - Green. N.Y.: Random House.

How do we know what a person is like? We look at his or her characteristics. A person's character is shown in the way he or she feels and acts.

Scrooge has a mean character.

Santa Claus has a jolly character.

When we read about a person's actions and feelings, we can make judgments about that person's character.

Read the selection.

Bill Benson looked only once at his homework assignment. Immediately, he started moaning to his seatmate, Candy Caries, about its length. As he shuffled out of the room after the bell, he couldn't help but remark to his teacher that the room was too stuffy to work in. The teacher only smiled and shook her head at Bill's complaints.

Circle the letter for the best answer.

1. Which statement describes Bill's character best?

   A. He is a pleasant person
   B. He is a cranky sort.
   C. He is careless
   D. He loves school.

2. It is likely that Bill has complained before because _____.

   A. he complained about the length of the assignment
   B. he complained about the room's stuffiness
   C. he shuffled out of the room
   D. the teacher only shook her head when he complained

3. Faced with the possibility of running an errand for his parents, Bill is likely to say _____.

   A. "Do I have to go? Why don't you ask Uncle Joe this time?"
   B. "Sure I'll go! Should I walk or take the bus?"
   C. "Okay, Dad. I'll go right after I finish my homework."
   D. "I'm way ahead of you, Pop! I took care of it already."

GO ON

TO THE TEACHER: The student reads a selection and identifies traits of the main character.

T: These are the questions. Circle the letter for the best answer. One, which statement describes Bill's character best? A. He is a pleasant person. B. He is a cranky sort. C. He is careless. D. He loves school. Alright. Now Michael.On that one over there, number one...aaa...first of all which one did you choose

M: C

T: Aaa...He is careless. Now why did you choose that one?

M: Cause he aaa....he a he a didn't wanta do his homework and he complained about the room is stuffy so he could get out of it.

T: Yeah but I don't understand how you get that as careless.

M: I don't know (the rest is inaudible)

T: Ummm.. you explained to me before..okay...ummm...about the word careless...right? Can you kinda tell me again what - you know - what your feeling about what it meant and so forth?

M: He didn't care about...about the work and he wanted to get out of the room

T: okay, now let's go on to the second one. Alright? Ahh...two. It is likely that Bill has complained before because A. He complained about the length of the assignment B. He complained about the room's stuffiness. C. He shuffled out of the room. D. The teacher only shook her head when he complained. Alright. Can you tell me which one you choose? And kinda like why you choose that one?

M:B. Because he said the room was stuffy and he wanted to get out of doing the work.

T: Well I mean how did you know he wanted to get out of doing the work?

M: Cause when the bell rung he he said the room was too stuffy to work in

T: Uh huh..ummmm...what makes you think that he's complained before though?

M: He ain't complain before though

T: He didn't complain before?

M: He mighta complained before about another assignment but this assignment he didn't complain.

T: Alright this is the first time he complained about this assignment. But do you think that he's complained about anything else or anything else - you know -

M; Yup

T: Well what makes you think so?

M: Cause if he didn't want to do the work he wouldn't he wouldn't do nothing

T: What do you mean I don't understand

M: If he didn't want to do the work he wouldn't want to go to the store or nothing or write or nothing he just wanta walk the halls or something

T: I see so he was in the class and complaining about it then.

M: Umm,mmmm

T: Alright. Now you said (inaudible) you kinda felt that he had complained before because he complained about the room's stuffiness, okay? Now how do you get those two together. His complaining about the room's stuffiness indicating to you that he's complained many times before.

M: I don't know.

T: Do they have anything to do with each other? I mean you put 'em down.

M: I know that but ..if he complained about the room's stuffiness that's how I put it down

T: Oh, okay I see so the fact that he's complained once probably means that he's complained about a lot of other things

M: Uhh...huh

T: Okay . Umm.mmm why do you think that?

M: I don't know

T: Do you think the room really is stuffy?

M: No he just want to get out of doing his work.

T: Uhh..huh.how do you think the teacher will react to him?

M: Uhh.. she probably tell him...

T: Tell him what?

M: Open the window or something.

T: Uhh..huh. Alright, let's go on to the third one. Faced with the possibility of running an errand for his parents Bill is likely to say A. Do I have to go why don't you ask Uncle Joe this time. B. Sure I'll go should I walk or take the bus? C. Okay Dad, I'll go right after I finish my homework D. I'm way ahead of you Pop I took care of it already.

T: And you choose which one?

M: Number C.

T: Okay Dad, I'll go right after I finish my homework. Why do you think you'd pick that one? I mean why did you pick that one as something he's likely to say if his parents ask him to do something?

M: Cause Cause I read the number B and it said Sure should I walk or catch the bus and I know it's far and I and he probably won't probably walk that far then go to the store then and he probably say I do it right after I do my homework

T: Yeah. You told me something about his homework before...before.. you know the first time we went through this. What'd you tell me about his homework?

M: He didn't want to do the homework from class and he just made that up.

T: What, about homework?

M: Uh..huh. So he won't probably have to go to the store.

T: So in other words what you're saying is that that's just an excuse for him

M: Mmm...mmmh.

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